Sukhra

(Mid 5th Century – c. 493)

BRIEFING

Sukhra (also spelled Sufaray, Sufray, Surkhab, Sarafra'i) was an Iranian nobleman from the House of Karen, who was the de facto ruler of the Sasanian Empire from 484 to 493. He was active during the reign of shah Peroz I (r. 457-484), Balash (r. 484 – 488) and Kavad I (r. 488-496). He is often confused with his father Zarmihr Hazarwuxt and son Zarmihr Karen.

He first appears in 484, when Peroz I appoints him as the minister (wuzurg framadār) of the empire. Peroz I was defeated and killed the same year during a campaign against the Hephthalite Empire, which seized much of the empire's eastern territory. Sukhra then avenged Peroz I by invading Hephthalite territory and inflicting a major defeat on them.

When he returned from his campaign, he was praised by the Sasanian nobles, and Balash was elected as king. However, it was in reality Sukhra that had control over the empire. In 488, Sukhra had Balash deposed and installed Peroz I's son Kavad I as the new king. However, Sukhra still remained the power behind the throne. In 493, Kavad I had Sukhra exiled to Shiraz in order to minimize his power. Fearful of rebellion, Kavad I asked for the assistance of Shapur of Ray, who defeated Sukhra's loyalists, and had him captured and sent to Ctesiphon, where he was executed.

EARLY LIFE

Sukhra was born in Shiraz in the administrative division of Ardashir-Khwarrah in Pars—he was the son of Zarmihr Hazarwuxt, a Sasanian commander who was active in Armenia. In 484, Peroz I, before invading the territory of the Hephthalite Empire, had his brother Balash installed as viceroy, and Sukhra appointed as his minister. Peroz I, however, suffered a major defeat to the Hephthalites and was killed at the battle of Herat. According to al-Tabari, Sukhra was the governor of Sakastan before his appointment as minister.

HEPHTHALITE-SASSANIAN WAR OF 484

The Hephthalite–Sasanian War of 484 was a military confrontation that took place in 484 between an invading force of the Sasanian Empire under the command of Peroz I and a smaller army of the Hephthalite Empire under the command of Khushnavaz. The battle was a catastrophic defeat for the Sasanian forces who were almost completely wiped out. Peroz, the Sassanid king, was killed in the action.

Context

In 459, the Hephthalites occupied Bactria and were confronted by the forces of the Sassanid king, Hormizd III. It was then that Peroz, in an apparent pact with the Hephthalites, killed Hormizd, his brother, and established himself as the new king. He would go on to kill the majority of his family and began a persecution of various Christian sects in his territories.

Peroz quickly moved to maintain peaceful relations with the Byzantine Empire to the west. To the east, he attempted to check the Hephthalites, whose armies had begun their conquest of eastern Iran. The Romans supported the Sassanids in these efforts, sending them auxiliary units. The efforts to deter the Hephthalite expansion met with failure when Peroz chased their forces deep into Hephthalite territory and was surrounded. Peroz was taken prisoner in 481 and was made to deliver his son, Kavadh, as a hostage for three years, further paying a ransom for his release.

It was this humiliating defeat which led Peroz to launch a new campaign against the Hephthalites.

Battle

In 484, after the liberation of his son, Peroz formed an enormous army and marched northeast to confront the Hephthalites. The king marched his forces all the way to Balkh where he established his base camp and rejected emissaries from the Hunnic king Khushnavaz. Peroz's forces advanced from Herat to Balkh. The Huns, learning of Peroz's way of advance, set up an ambush for him. In the ensuing battle, Peroz was defeated and killed by a Hephthalite army near Balkh. His army was completely destroyed, whilst his body was never found. Four of his sons and brothers had also died. The main Sasanian cities of the eastern region of Khorasan–Nishapur, Herat, and Marw were now under Hephthalite rule.

In Procopius's account, the Hephthalites used an overextended and camouflaged ditch to defeat the Sasanians, but the Khonsarinejad et al. (2021) argues the ditch story to be dubious.

Aftermath

The Huns invaded the Sassanid territories which had been left without a central government following the death of the king. Much of the Sassanid land was pillaged repeatedly for a period of two years[7] until a Persian noble from the House of Karen, Sukhra, restored some order by establishing one of Peroz's brothers, Balash, as the new king. The Hunnic menace to Sassanid lands continued until the reign of Khosrau I. Balash failed to take adequate measures to counter the Hephthalite incursions, and after a rule of four years, he was deposed in favor of Kavadh I, his nephew and the son of Peroz. After the death of his father, Kavadh had fled the kingdom and took refuge with his former captors, the Hephthalites, who had previously held him as a hostage. He there married one of the daughters of the Hunnic king, who gave him an army to conquer his old kingdom and take the throne. The Sassanids were made to pay tributes to the Hephthalite Empire until 496 when Kavadh was ousted and forced to flee once again to Hephthalite territory. King Djamasp was installed on the throne for two years until Kavadh returned at the head of an army of 30,000 troops and retook his throne, reigning from 498 until his death in 531, when he was succeeded by his son, Khosrau I.

According to Irfan Shahid, the tactic of using trenches by the Hephthalites in this war was adopted by the Persians who successfully used it later at the Battle of Thannuris (528) against the Byzantines. The Persian tactic was subsequently adopted and successfully used by the Byzantines at Battle of Dara (530) and even by the Muslims at the Battle of the Trench (627).

SUKHRA'S REVENGE

Sukhra then set out to avenge his death, and took the majority of the Sasanian army with him; when he reached Gorgan, the Hephthalite king Khushnavaz got informed of his plan to attack him, and quickly prepared his men for war. He then sent a message to Sukhra "asking him about his intentions and enquiring what his name and his official position were." Sukhra shortly sent a message back to Khushnavaz, informing him about his name and position. Khushnavaz thereafter sent another message, warning him of doing the same mistake as Peroz I.

However, his words did not discourage Sukhra, who then marched against Khushnavaz, and inflicted a heavy defeat on his men. Khushnavaz thereafter sued for peace, which Sukhra would only accept if he would give him everything Khushnavaz had seized from Peroz I's camp, which included his treasuries, the chief priest (mowbed) of the empire, and his daughter Perozdukht. Khushnavaz accepted his demands, and peace was made.

After his victory, he returned to the Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon, where the nobles "received him with great honor, extolled his feats, and raised him to a lofty status such as none but kings were able to attain after him" Balash was thereafter crowned as the new king of the empire. However, he proved unpopular among the nobility and clergy who had him deposed after just four years in 488. Sukhra, who had played a key role in Balash's deposition, appointed Peroz I's young son Kavad I as the new shah of Iran. According to Miskawayh (d. 1030), Sukhra was Kavad's maternal uncle.

RISE AND DOWNFALL

Even after the ascension of a new Sasanian king, Sukhra still possessed a massive amount of power. The young and inexperienced Kavad was tutored by Sukhra during his first five years as shah. During this period, Kavad was a mere figurehead, whilst Sukhra was the de facto ruler of the empire. This is emphasized by al-Tabari, who states that Sukhra "was in charge of government of the kingdom and the management of affairs ... [T]he people came to Sukhra and undertook all their dealings with him, treating Kavad as a person of no importance and regarding his commands with contempt." Numerous regions and the representatives of the elite paid tribute to Sukhra not to Kavad. Sukhra controlled the royal treasury and the Iranian military. In 493, Kavad, having reached adulthood, wanted to put an end to Sukhra's dominance, and had him exiled to his native Shiraz in southwestern Iran. Even in exile, however, Sukhra was in control of everything except the kingly crown. He bragged about having put Kavad on the throne.

Alarmed by the thought that Sukhra might rebel, Kavad wanted to get rid of him completely. He lacked the manpower to do so, however, as the army was controlled by Sukhra and the Sasanians relied mainly on the military of the Seven Great Houses of Iran. He found his solution in Shapur of Ray, a powerful nobleman from the House of Mihran, and a resolute opponent of Sukhra. Shapur, at the head of an army of his own men and disgruntled nobles, marched to Shiraz, defeated Sukhra's forces, and imprisoned him in Ctesiphon. Even in prison, Sukhra was considered too powerful and was executed. This caused displeasure among some prominent members of the nobility weakening Kavad's status as shah.

LEGACY

Even after Sukhra's death, his family still possessed much power within the Sasanian Empire. His son, Zarmihr Karen, helped Kavad in 488 to reclaim the Sasanian throne from his younger brother Djamasp. In the same year, one of Sukhra's other sons, Bozorgmehr, was appointed as the minister of the empire, and continued serve under the office during the reign of Kavad's successor, Khosrow I (r. 531–579). He thereafter served as spahbed under Khosrow I's successor Hormizd IV. Zarmihr Karen, along with Sukhra's other son Karin, aided Khosrow I in his war against the Turks. As a reward for their aid, Zarmihr Karen was rewarded with land in Zabulistan, while Karin was rewarded with land in Tabaristan, thus starting the Qarinvand dynasty, which ruled until the 11th-century.

Sukhra's son Simah-i Burzin served as the spahbed of the kust of Khorasan during the reign of Khosrow I. A descendant of Sukhra, Burzin Shah, was the governor of Nishapur during the reign of Yazdegerd III (r. 632–651).